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U.S. Considers Sending Gunships to El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR, Aug. 31 (Reuters) — The United States is considering supplying the Salvadoran Air Force with gunships capable of firing 18,000 rounds a minute, according to Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering and other United States officials here.

They said the Reagan Administration might supply three of the AC-47 twin-prop planes, a gunship nicknamed "Puff the Magic Dragon" in the Vietnam War.

"There is no firm decision on the AC-47, but it is certainly a piece of equipment under consideration," Mr. Pickering said in a recent interview.

[A United States Embassy spokesman, Gregory Lagana, said: "The AC-47 gunship is under active consideration for the Salvadoran Air Force. All military equipment for El Salvador is considered on a case-by-case basis with an eye towards appropriate safeguards for their use."

[Mr. Lagana added that he could not set a date for when the gunships might be given to the air force, saying that was still being considered.]

3 Rapid-Fire Guns on Plane

The AC-47, which has three rapid-fire guns, is a slow-moving, low-flying plane capable of putting a bullet in every square foot of an area the size of a football field.

Increasingly in the last year, El Salvador's Air Force has used United States-supplied jets, mostly A-37's, to bomb guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

Human rights groups, including Americas Watch, say the raids inflict more casualties on civilians near combat zones than on the guerrillas.

Almost five years of civil war in El Salvador have left some 45,000 people dead and have devastated the country's economy.

Some Had Urged Shift

Some United States Government and military officials have urged use of AC-47's instead of the bombers because their firepower can be more precisely controlled.

"One rapid way to relieve forces under pressure and defend isolated targets is to have early possibilities to bring additional firepower on the scene," Mr. Pickering said.

But some diplomats and human rights officials say they fear improper use of AC-47's could lead to even greater casualties among civilians than those apparently caused by the bombings.

'Concern Over Atrocities'

According to American intelligence sources, Gen. Paul Gorman, the senior United States military commander for Latin America, urged last year that American pilots fly a larger gunship, the AC-130 Specter, against guerrilla strongholds.

The Reagan Administration rejected

the plan, which would have involved the Central Intelligence Agency, as too risky politically, the sources said.

Early this year Assistant Deputy Secretary of Defense Nestor D. Sanchez said he was reluctant to send heavy-firepower gunships to the Salvadoran military "because of our concern over atrocities."

Other American military officials said they were opposed to the gunships on the ground that the Salvadoran Army needed more troops, not increased firepower.

"I don't think the basic philosophy has changed," said Mr. Lagana, the United States Embassy spokesman. "It is still an infantryman's war."

"But you have got limits to the size the Salvadoran Army can grow," he added.